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ABSTRACT

This review of the state of foreign language education in the United States notes that early grammar-translation methods gave way to the Army Method during World War II. Students learned both inductively and deductively and acquired primarily oral-aural competence, with reading and writing as secondary goals. Not until the late 1950s did the audiolingual method become dominant in the academic world, with tapes, new textbooks and language laboratories and the support of the 1958 National Defense Education Act. FLES (foreign languages in the elementary schools) programs enrolled two million children by 1964. By the late 1960s, the cognitive-code approach to foreign language teaching took over, with the goal of equal competence in oral-aural, writing and reading skills. The number of workshops and inservice training programs for language teachers increased. The 1970s show a shift toward more humanistic education and individualized instruction, although the need for continual and diligent study, pronunciation instruction and the supportiveness of group learning may dictate against individualized study. Foreign language study has declined sharply in the past several years. To counteract this trend, schools should emulate the relevance of schools like Berlitz; content courses taught in the foreign language, which some colleges offer; and courses that train students for careers that involve foreign languages. (CHK)

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# Foreign Languages– Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow



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Comparisons can be treacherous, but the plight of foreign languages in the 1930's and early 1940's was even more bleak and dismal than it is today. Generally speaking, classroom instruction centered on grammar and translation. Students recited rules and paradigms, they heard little foreign language spoken, and they rarely spoke it themselves. What they heard or hestitantly voiced sounded dull and bookish.

In addition to this unproductive approach to foreign language instruction in the schools, the isolationism of the United States between World War I and World War II had undoubtedly contributed to the decline in the study of foreign languages. Given these circumstances, how could there have been any compelling, driving interest in foreign languages? There wasn't.

Then came Pearl Harbor. Because of the desperate need of the government for people, both civilian and military, with a knowledge of foreign languages and because of the ineffectiveness of most foreign language instruction, the so-called Army Method of teaching another language (The Army Specialized Training Program) was developed. Although the Army identified and promoted this method, the American Council of Learned Societies had developed

its basic concepts from theories of foreign language learning proposed much earlier.

Structural linguists who advocated this method believed that grammar is best learned both inductively and deductively, that is, by pattern drills followed, if necessary, by explanation. (A pattern drill is an oral exercise involving repetition of a structural pattern or grammar problem. The learner receives a model sentence and then a cue requiring a response within that linguistic pattern.)

The goal of this method is rapid acquisition of oral-aural competency, with reading and writing receiving secondary emphasis. This method also stresses learning and understanding the contemporary life-style and habits of the people and the customs of the foreign country. Trainees converted miles into kilometers and kilometers into miles; they changed Fahrenheit into Centigrade and vice versa. Their vocabulary was contemporary, practical, usable. They spoke and understood the foreign language even though they might not have been familiar with its literary masterpieces.

The Army Method involved careful selection of trainees so that those who entered the program were highly motivated, intellectually superior, and linguistically talented. The nine months trainees spent immersed in learning the target language were equivalent to two years of high school plus four years of college instruction in the language.

This method could hardly have failed with so many built-in components to insure success. Its effectiveness put the spotlight on the failure of the traditional method of teaching foreign languages. The academic world should have been stirred to action but it dragged its feet instead. Between 1947 and 1953, 46 colleges and universities dropped the foreign language requirement for the bachelor of arts degree.

At the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in St. Louis in May 1952, Earl J. McGrath, U.S. Commissioner of Education, challenged foreign language teachers:

Whether we discharge our world responsibilities well or poorly, foolishly or wisely, ignorantly or understandingly, will be determined by our ability to understand other peoples and their ability to understand us. However valuable our military and foreign assistance programs may be, . . . our world position and the future of democracy in the decades ahead will not be determined by our military power, nor by our generous financial and economic assistance to other peoples. . . . Our own long-term leadership must rest on firmer grounds than military and other forms of material assistance.

Only through the ability to use another language even modestly can one really become conscious of the full meaning of being a member of another nationality or cultural group. It is in our national interest to give as many of our citizens as possible the opportunity to gain these cultural insights. . . . If I may say so in the

most constructive and kindly spirit, our present inadequate supply of Americans who can speak, read, and understand other languages has been caused in part by the language teachers themselves.

In that same year, 1952, the Rockefeller Foundation made a grant to the Modern Language Association to assess and evaluate the role of foreign languages in our national life at that time and in the future and to develop more effective techniques in the teaching of languages.

Toward the end of the 1950's, the audio-lingual method, or the "New Key," emerged and dominated language teaching for nearly a decade. Aural comprehension and oral production had priority over the graphic skills. Dialogues became the order of the day, and students were expected to memorize them.

New textbooks with less emphasis on grammar and replete with dialogues and pattern practice drills quickly superseded the older books. Tapes of native speakers reciting the dialogues and drills became indispensable to the foreign language teacher using this method. Millions of students listened to these tapes in classrooms or in language laboratories, which sprang up all over the country. In 1958, federal funds were provided for such equipment, and by 1962, some 6,000 high schools had language laboratories.

The launching of Sputnik I in October 1957 also sparked a re-

newed interest in foreign languages. The National Defense Education Act, passed in 1958, established nationwide NDEA Institutes which assumed the gigantic responsibility of attempting to retrain approximately 25,000 teachers in the new methodology. In the years 1961 through 1968, nearly $7.5 million went into NDEA Institutes.

In this same period under the aegis of federal funding, an old concept received new emphasis—foreign languages in the elementary school (FLES). Prior to World War II, only a few elementary schools in the United States offered foreign languages, but by 1964, an estimated 2 million youngsters in grades K-6 were learning other languages.

FLES programs varied in pattern. Some started in kindergarten; some in the first or second grades; and many, in the fourth grade. A number of school districts subscribed to television-taught FLES programs. Larger systems employed a qualified instructor to teach foreign languages in all the elementary schools of that district. Others required regular classroom instructors to teach the language even if they had little or no foreign language training. (Many elementary school teachers in the early 1960's kept one day's assignment ahead of the pupils as they struggled to learn the foreign language they were teaching.) Still other FLES programs depended on community efforts and met once a week after school.

But the foreign language teaching profession became disillusioned in the latter part of the 1960's. The audio-lingual method did not prove to be the panacea that some had believed it to be. Many students rebelled at memorization of dialogues. Some did not always grasp learning by analogy (i.e., perceiving identical patterns in similar structural relationships), and the behavioristic theory of learning was challenged. Students complained about lack of relevancy. The outlook was discouraging.

The soul searching that gripped the profession at that time resulted in the cognitive-code approach to the teaching of foreign languages. This successor to the audio-lingual method is an amalgam of the best linguistic theories developed since the beginning of the century.

The objectives of the cognitive approach are to simultaneously develop competency in oral-aural skills, reading, and writing; it is more descriptive than prescriptive. It does not proceed in an inductive fashion as did the audio-lingual but rather from a focus on structures and linguistic functions to oral-aural exercises, reading, and writing.

Whereas the audio-lingual purist did not use the students' native language in the classroom, the cognitive-code exponent recognizes the futility of trying to explain the unknown and difficult in the foreign language. In all fairness, it should be pointed out that many, many teachers of foreign lan-

guages throughout the United States have been successfully using the cognitive approach for years even though they may not have known it by that name.

Along with the development of the cognitive-code approach, there was an increase in the number of workshops, symposiums, and in-service training programs for foreign language teachers in an effort to upgrade programs and curb the nationwide decline in the study of foreign languages. Thousands of dedicated teachers took summer courses—even when this was not required of them—to improve their teaching and their competence in foreign languages. Culture capsules (i.e., studies and presentations of segments of the foreign culture) were developed and teacher-pupil interaction analyses were made.

Secondary schools and colleges began to grant credit for study abroad. Bilingual education became a reality.

But the growth of the cognitive-code approach; the proliferation of workshops, symposiums, and seminars; and the development of supplementary learning activities are only a part of what has been happening in foreign languages. Up until recently, the emphasis in this discipline and in others as well has been on teaching methods. Now the focus is shifting from the teacher and instruction to the student and learning. The concern is humanistic and not mechanistic.

The 1970's will probably be

known as the decade of individualized instruction, an approach which many today hail as the new panacea. All will agree that it should play an important role in education. As a matter of fact, many good teachers have been individualizing their foreign language instruction to some degree for a long time.

Briefly, individualized instruction is instruction on a tailormade basis which takes into account the student's aptitude, interests, talents, motivation, and goals. Programmed instruction, mini-courses, and learning activity packages may all be a part of it. (However, programmed learning is not necessarily synonymous with individualized instruction, because if every student receives the same programmed material regardless of interest or need, instruction has not been individualized.)

An extensive individualized instruction program is not always the best pedagogy. Teachers should give careful consideration to a number of questions before embarking on such a program.

For example, does the library or media center have sufficient resources and instructional materials to augment such a program? Will students be able to drop the program without penalty, and what provisions will be made for those who do so? Will one teacher be responsible for the program, or will responsibility be shared? How will students develop oral proficiency in the language? (This is one of the main considerations in

individualizing instruction of foreign languages.) What about proper sequence of courses in the foreign language? (This can be a serious difficulty if students take a wide variety of mini-courses, because students with varying degrees of proficiency may be in the same group.)

Individualized instruction in foreign languages at the introductory level may not be the most productive approach for the majority of students for the following reasons:

1. Students need to become oriented to learning a foreign language. It is not a subject that they may study spasmodically or not at all until the day before an exam. Each day's learning builds on previously acquired knowledge.

2. If students study independently, they may establish poor pronunciation habits.

3. Many students feel self-conscious and ill-at-ease when attempting to utter strange new words. A group-learning situation makes it easier for some to overcome these inhibitions than one in which they are listening to themselves.

4. The esprit de corps and camaraderie that so often are part of a class situation may be impossible to develop in many individualized instruction programs. However, the highly motivated and intellectually superior student or the slow learner may benefit from an individualized program at the introductory level.

Despite the positive develop-

ments in foreign language teaching, the study of foreign languages in the United States has declined sharply in the past several years. Colleges and universities from coast to coast have relaxed or dropped their foreign language requirements. Many high school foreign language classes have fewer students than in previous years. Scores of elementary schools have discontinued FLES programs.

Why? Is it because studying foreign languages is not really meaningful to students? Has the importance of foreign languages diminished in the eyes of the public?

Perhaps one clue to the answer to these questions is to be found in language schools throughout the nation. Last year, the Berlitz Schools of Languages of America reported that foreign language training for corporation executives makes up over half of its business compared to a negligible amount 20 years ago. The Inlingua Schools of Languages, a chain formed seven years ago, now has about 140 branches.

Another clue lies in the success of content courses taught in the foreign language in a limited number of institutions of higher education. Some foreign language specialists have also advocated interdisciplinary courses at the secondary school level.

The message seems obvious. If foreign language courses are relevant, students will enroll in them. The healthy survival of the study of foreign languages would seem

to be contingent on a new role for foreign languages. The future should see more emphasis on courses that can assist those who plan for careers involving foreign languages—courses emphasizing translating, interpreting, travel and tourism, international law, international trade, and so on.

The profession has again been challenged. It must meet that challenge successfully, productively. It can and it will. □